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Security Scrutiny Lesson Seen in Philby Case

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LONDON—Was Soviet "Master Spy" Harold (Kim) Philby really all that important? Do his activities, past, present and future, justify a long newspaper probe and ravaged soul-searching by the authorities? Or is the James Bond syndrome warping the judgment of serious people?

For a start, it is worth recording the opinion of those inside the intelligence world. There is no doubt in the minds of the Secret Intelligence Service. Up to 1951, Philby had solid hopes of becoming head of that organization. And, as they later discovered, he was doing maximum damage in those same years.

Equally the KGB (the Russian, intelligence service) risked keeping him in the West for a dozen years after he came under suspicion as a "third man" because of his continued usefulness to them.

His use was not merely in the provision of disconnected detail. By luck and judgment, this master spy and arch traitor was able to supply Moscow not only with SIS's deployment in the field, but with information on the state of their intelligence on Communist affairs. Unlike his fellow double-agent George Blake, he was able, in fact, to influence policy, both British and Soviet.

The picture of Philby's survival given in the Sunday Times (in a series on Philby and British counterespionage) is a shocking one. On four separate occasions he got away with the benefit of the doubt; on the last he simply got away.

The reasons are twofold. One was that he had proved himself, to the Americans as well as the British, a very high-class operator who was also a charming fellow, "one of us." The other was even more serious: the politicians' reluctance to deal with a very unsavory question on its merits.

Any assessment of possible reforms must begin with what has already been done. While Philby and his friends were double-crossing us, we were pulling in good numbers of high-grade defectors from the other side.

One could name at least 15 in the past two decades who have entered with equal zest into the double game and given us critically valuable information.

Great credit for this goes to Sir Dick White, by far the best head of SIS we have had. As a former head of MI5 (British security service), he has defused the pernicious rivalry between these two services and, equally important, got relations with the CIA back on a good footing.

He has also improved SIS practice in security and recruitment. Socially the service is now considerably more heterogenous than the Foreign Office. They also treat security against enemy penetration very seriously.

My own main reservation about the top SIS echelons is that they are too gentlemanly in a deadly game where that is a definite disadvantage.

Nevertheless, I think that the great value of the London Sunday Times report is the question it raises about SIS's political and public accountability. I believe that the present dispersal of power between the Foreign Office and the prime minister exposes SIS to a dangerous degree of autonomy.

To my mind there is a strong case for a new body, quite outside Whitehall and Westminster, to subject the service to a regular inspection and, if necessary, overhaul.

An inbred little commission exists at the moment, but no one seems to pay any attention to its reports. True outsiders are already coming more and more into use in the government machine, and in the United States they are co-opted into the White House itself to advise on secret matters of global policy.

A group here consisting of, for instance, a suitably high-powered b u s i nessman, scientist, journalist, judge, and woman might well produce a valuable increase in public confidence.

The day we can relax will be the day the last KGB agent gets the train for Moscow. There is no sign of a slackening of KGB activity in Britain.